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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: review of the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006)

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The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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* E/CN.5/2006/1.



The 44th session of the Commission on Social Development marks the end of a 10-year period of global attention to the elimination of poverty. The major focus of this Commission is the review of the 1st UN Decade to Eliminate Poverty. During past years the Monterrey Consensus, the Millennium Development Goals, the 10-year review of Copenhagen, and the Millennium Summit have underscored the global urgency to eradicate poverty. Despite this, we have not yet reached a turning point; poverty intensifies despite a concurrent creation of immense global wealth.

While it is possible to point to some isolated successes in reducing poverty, there is no systemic or structural reduction of poverty. On the contrary, the rate of poverty is on the rise worldwide and economic inequality is growing scandalously and dangerously. According to 2005 Human Development Report, 1/5 of humanity survives on less than \$1 a day while the richest 1/5th of humanity thinks nothing of spending \$2 daily for a cup of coffee.¹ The Human Development Report of 2005 further warns, "There is real danger that the next 10 years will deliver far less for Human Development than has been promised."² We must, as a global community of nations and NGOs, be disgraced and shamed by the situations of dire and extreme poverty at the end of the UN Decade to Eliminate Poverty. Let us further name that the poverty of which we speak is not a statistic or distant reality in any nation. It is the concrete and painful denial of food, inaccessibility of potable water, limitation of basic shelter and basic health protection to children and families for whom education and dignified employment is a distant dream. Poverty is a death sentence that belies a commitment to Human Rights.

We remind this Commission that in 1996 the General Assembly³ declared that poverty eradication is "an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind." We further remind this Commission that, in the words delivered at Copenhagen, "heads of State and Government are committed to a political, economic, ethical and spiritual vision for social development that is based on human dignity, human rights, equality, respect, peace, democracy, mutual responsibility and cooperation, and full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of people. Accordingly, we will give the highest priority in national, regional and international policies and actions to the promotion of social progress, justice and the betterment of the human condition, based on full participation by all."

It is this commitment by the United Nations governments to "full participation by all" that we highlight in this statement. As Secretary-General Kofi Annan said this past October on The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, "poverty can be reduced only if we reach out to the poorest of the poor, including those often excluded from the development process. Only through partnerships with them, and by taking steps to tackle inequality, can we eradicate poverty in all its dimensions⁴." Additionally, this very Commission at Copenhagen recognized "that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their own capacities is a main objective of development and

¹ Summary, Human Development Report 2005, International cooperation the crossroads: Aid, Trade and security in an unequal world. UNDP, 1 Un Plaza New York, NY 10017 Pg 17

² Summary, Human Development Report 2005, International cooperation the crossroads: Aid, Trade and security in an unequal world. UNDP, 1 Un Plaza New York, NY 10017 Pg 16

³ GENERAL A/RES/51/178, 11 February 1997

⁴ Secretary-General, SG/SM/10163, OBV/515

its principal resource. Empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of our societies.⁵

We make this statement to the Commission knowing that remedies are possible. It has become a "truism" of our time that for the first time in history we have at our disposal the resources, skills and technology to end poverty. We know from the experience of our NGOs, whose organizations serve in educational, social service, development, human rights and gender programs that span north to south and east to west, that full participation and empowerment of those affected by poverty is essential to progress. Encouraged by the 2005 theme of the International Day for poverty eradication, *Achieving the Millennium Development Goals - empowering the poorest of the poor*, we appeal to governments to give due attention in all strategies to eliminate poverty, to various methodologies and modes of empowerment, and to participation for those who live in conditions of poverty. One size does not fit all peoples. Unless the primary stakeholders – that is, persons who live in conditions of poverty – are involved in policymaking and decision-making on issues that affect their lives, any poverty reduction program is bound to continued failure. Unfortunately, we have experienced very little by way of governments empowering and engaging the participation of local communities in turning the tide of poverty. Poverty reduction cannot be imposed from the outside; rather, it must effectively engage the energies and activities of local communities. However, those who live in conditions of poverty have been historically and structurally excluded, not only due to poverty but also due to crosscutting issues of gender, race, age, religious beliefs, immigration status, sexual orientation; implementation of real participation will require affirmative changes in structures and processes with a creative commitment to a human rights approach that links economic structures to the human person.

More often we experience macroeconomic strategies with little intersection of microeconomic realities. In areas of trade and international finance we have not seen the primary stakeholders, that is, those living in conditions of poverty invited to the tables of planning, decision-making and implementation strategies. We do not see those living in conditions of poverty having any say in budget allocations for education or water projects. Participation on levels of analysis, definition, implementation and evaluation intrinsically links the process of poverty reduction to collective self-determination. NGOs have stated repeatedly and will continue to insist that the individual person is the subject and center of all development. Therefore, participation on all levels must necessarily be the driving principle of decisions and policies.

We offer to this Commission a snapshot of our experience, from which we have learned that greater participation leads to success at elimination of poverty and to empowerment of communities. The "neighborhood parliaments" of southern India is one creative, inclusive approach that can be widely applicable and is already echoed in practices such as the Basic Communities of Latin America, community-based monitoring and "neighborhood clustering approach" in the Philippines, and the "ayalkkootams" or neighborhood assemblies organized in regions of India. In neighborhood parliaments viable participation requires forums that insist on the inclusion of the least or the "small"

⁵ World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development - Part B

people with “small voices.” This is the crux of the whole issue of participation - forums are small, accessible and inclusive. Experience teaches that the larger a forum becomes, the small voices get drowned out. Small neighborhood parliaments are organized so as not to exceed thirty families each. The people at the base have an active say in matters that affect them - in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs. In one instance more than seven thousand neighborhood parliaments of children/adolescents were activated in a single district, linked at village, inter-village, block, and district levels. These multitiered federations of neighborhood parliaments are based on principles and structures that ensure:

- Power is immediate and local;
- Representation is by numerical equality;
- Process is characterized by interactivity;
- Representation is flexible with the ability to change if the group is dissatisfied;
- Decision-making is at the lowest levels possible;
- Structure is reinforced for use by many community activities such as small savings.

In the neighborhood parliaments promoted by NGOs, children became the agents of social change. They were, in one example, able to identify the school dropouts in their own parliaments and presented the statistics to the district authorities, thus enabling more children to go to school. We know this has a direct affect on poverty eradication. Likewise neighborhood parliament participants were able to involve themselves to solve other civic issues regarding roads, streetlights, sanitation, and child labor. The poor women of the neighborhood parliaments had a small savings scheme and were able to function as a bank for themselves. The community identified the extreme poor by the nine poverty risk factors that were promoted by UNICEF. The extreme poor were the priority for any benefit whether for a loan from the group, banks or government. The State Government of Kerala, India provided State budgeting support for the development of the local government structures (Panchayats.) Neighborhood clusters were able to develop needs-based community plans and the communities became the watchdogs for the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programs.

We also note, for the encouragement of the Commission, that NGOs have utilized and gathered best practices that are available to governments. It was with eagerness in 2003, in partnership with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, that the Sub-Committee for the Eradication of Poverty of the NGO Committee for Social Development published a booklet “Best Practices in Poverty Eradication: Case Studies from the Field,” which we made available to governments and can now be found on the website in 3 languages: English, French and Spanish. It can be accessed at: <http://www.franciscansinternational.org/resources/publications.php>.

Our NGOs are prepared to partner with governments toward greater participation and empowerment of those whose lives are characterized by material poverty yet who have such richness of human spirit to offer the world. We remind states “that it is the primary responsibility of States to attain these

goals.”⁶ Our organizations are working in many creative ways with communities in the field. We seek, as they do, access and partnership with governments which have a true vision of human rights and empowerment.

Following the ethical, social, political and economic imperatives of the Copenhagen Document we repeat the following principles that are the responsibility of governments:

- Assurance of full participation of the people, especially those who presently suffer the effects of poverty, in all strategies to eliminate poverty.
- Implementation of economic and social strategies that will include dignified employment available to all who can work.
- Reordering of society and economic structures so that accumulation of extreme wealth will be eliminated and priority given to equitable use of resources that are limited.

To this end we recommend that,

- Governments allocate and sustain resources to development projects that ensure local participation of all people, including: the elderly, adults, the young, and children; women as well as men; the self-employed, the employed, the not employed, and those who work in informal sectors; the physically able and those who suffer disabilities; the citizens of every country and nation, indigenous people, those who are not citizens, and refugees and immigrants.
- Governments evaluate, in a timely manner, the policies, criteria, and structures in place for development and eradication of poverty to determine that goals and objectives have been effective in doing what they were set to accomplish and in order to set new and more effective directions for progress in the eradication of poverty.
- That as part of the UN reform process the UN Security Council and all UN entities reallocate seats to ensure more equitable representation of all nations and sectors.
- That all international agencies and monetary institutions such as IMF, World Bank and WTO, include primary stakeholders (i.e., people who live in conditions of poverty) to participate directly in board of directors and planning committees.
- That this Commission and other UN bodies promulgate, in strong and urgent terms, a moral and ethical message to those people and places where wealth is accumulated in excess or where resources of the world are controlled by a minority, that there is a moral

⁶ World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development - Part B, # 27

imperative, a human rights imperative, that all persons have access to basic goods and livelihood, even at the cost of divestment for redistribution.

We understand that participation requires the bridging of differences. It requires outreach to and understanding of the interests of various parties. It requires changes in the dominant economic and social paradigm. It requires, perhaps most of all, political will. For as the 2005 World Summit Outcome⁷ states, "We remain concerned... with the slow and uneven progress towards poverty eradication..." This same body, said: "We strongly reiterate our determination to ensure the timely and full realization of the development goals and objectives agreed at the major United Nations conferences and summits, including those agreed at the Millennium Summit that are described as the Millennium Development Goals, which have helped to galvanize efforts towards poverty eradication."⁸ The timely realization for poverty eradication is now. The full realization of poverty eradication includes the participation, empowerment, and decision making of all.

Note:

Statement endorsed and supported by International Council of Jewish Women, School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Soroptimist International and VIVAT International, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; World Christian Life Community, a non-governmental organization on the Roster.

⁷ GA: 2005 World Summit Outcome (A/60/L.1) 15 September 15, 2005, # 19

⁸ GA: 2005 World Summit Outcome (A/60/L.1) 15 September 15, 2005, # 17